

# Bilingualism in Rarotonga

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## Abstract

The globalization of English is a mixed blessing for many of the worlds' small linguistic groups: it provides them with a *lingua franca* to expand their economic and political opportunities, but it also threatens to displace their indigenous languages. Analysis of codeswitching behavior indicates that English is becoming the dominant language among bilingual Rarotongans of the Cook Islands in the South Pacific. However, there are also social forces supporting the indigenous language and the bilingualism of Rarotongans appears assured for the time being.

**Key words:** Bilingualism, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, Culture Change.

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Linguistic groups with limited populations and confined geography are often attracted to English for its value in the marketplace and the political arena. However, when English dominates a language contact situation, it can not only cause the death of another language, but also the dissolution of the associated cultural group. Speakers of English as a second language who devalue their native tongue, risk depreciating their cultural identity and undermining their personal confidence. Bilingualism may be the best option for many postcolonial peoples, because it safeguards their sense of identity and community as they participate in a wider world.

Most of the citizens of the independent nation of the Cook Islands are bilingual in Cook Islands Maori (CIM) and the English of their New Zealand colonizers. Although Cook Islanders express their commitment to both languages, many parents on Rarotonga, the largest and most developed of the islands, have adopted an English-first policy for their children. As a result, many local scholars and leaders have expressed a concern about the future of CIM.

The Cook Islands consist of fifteen tropical islands in the central South Pacific. Cook Islanders, who are Polynesians closely related to the New Zealand Maori, refer to themselves and their indigenous language as Maori. About half (or 9,500) of the total population of the Cook Islands live on Rarotonga, the capital, which is about 20 miles in circumference, dominated by

mountainous peaks and surrounded by a coral reef which encloses a tropical lagoon.

Although European colonization of the Cook Islands began in the 1820's with the arrival of the London Missionary Society, bilingualism in English and CIM was not established until well into this century. The missionaries adopted an indigenous language policy: initially to promote spreading the gospel, later to isolate Cook Islanders from the influence of whalers, traders, and competing missionary groups. When the authority of the missionaries waned at the end of the last century, a New Zealand colony with English-speaking administrators was established. For a number of years the educational system continued in CIM, but the Maori asked for education in English and eventually the colonialists complied. Major linguistic changes took root in the Cook Islands in the late 1930's. The Maori kept their ancestral language at home and many learned English in the schools. From 1936 until 1945, literacy in English went from 16% to 50% among indigenous Rarotongans (Gilson 1991: 177). Although CIM was reintroduced into the schools in the 1940's, it was not popular with the Maori, who felt that the schools' primary role was to teach English.

Anthropologists and linguists use evidence of language dominance to determine the direction of culture change in multicultural settings. I conducted sociolinguistic fieldwork on Rarotonga in July and August of 1995 to determine language dominance in the contact situation there. My methodology consisted of observation and documentation of language use in a wide variety of public and private settings, supplemented by interviews of Cook Islanders. The discussion and explanation of my findings follows a brief description of language education in the Cook Islands.

CIM is primarily learned at home and English in school. The public school curriculum in the independent Cook Islands is adapted from New Zealand's (English) school curriculum, and its ultimate goal is the New Zealand School Certificate, a prerequisite for continuing on to a higher education abroad. In Rarotongan public primary schools, CIM is the language of instruction and English is introduced in the third year. Several private primary schools on Rarotonga focus on English as the language of instruction and all boast waiting lists of students whose parents prefer the education they provide. In secondary schools (ages 11 through 19), English is the language of instruction. However, most secondary school teachers are native speakers of CIM and they frequently codeswitch to CIM when they observe that students have not understood their English.

Informal interviews with 26 Rarotongans showed that language preferences are age-graded, with young people preferring English, and those over 25 preferring CIM. In anonymous essays, the majority of secondary students at all levels preferred English (22:11), and four made derogatory remarks about the CIM language. Nearly all Rarotongan adults interviewed learned CIM as their first language, and all who were parents said that they want bilingualism in CIM and English for their children. However, three adults estimated that

**Table 1.** Loan Words-Half Day in Parliament, July 1995.<sup>a</sup>

<b>English in CIM</b> <b>(English phonology)</b>	aye/nay	turnover tax
jockey	exclusive economic zone	<i>proper nouns</i>
speaker	agency	<i>place names</i>
primer minister	policy	<i>company names</i>
money	regulations	<i>surnames</i>
commission of inquiry	marine resources	
finance center	sport fishing	
company	million	<b>CIM in English</b>
offshore	minister of education	kia orana (greeting)
trust	tourist attraction	kiu kiu (a type of fish)
accountant	joint venture	<i>proper nouns</i>
financial secretary	supply	<i>place names</i>
privileges committee	«That's right»	<i>surnames</i>
	«Shame, shame»	
	fish aggregating device	

- a) Only English loan words spoken with English phonology are listed. CIM contains many English loanwords converted to CIM phonology, most of them dating to before the bilingual period. CIM has only nine consonants (k, m, n, ng, p, r, t, v, glottal stop), no consonant blends and no final consonants. Examples of English loan words in CIM phonology include *tuka* for sugar, *capu* for cup. These and many others are found in an early colonial dictionary of CIM (Savage, 1980).

about one half of Rarotongan parents now speak English to their children at home. Among parents interviewed, one stated that he believes children learn CIM without effort or encouragement, and four told me that their young children understand CIM, but do not speak it. Although all adults and most young people interviewed strongly favor survival of CIM, Rarotongan families appear to believe that «more Maori means less English» (Davis 1992: 12). These findings are consistent with observations of Cook Islanders in public settings: adults speak to each other in CIM, but to children in English. Children and teenagers speak to each other in both languages.

English is the language of government in Rarotonga, though codeswitching to CIM is a common occurrence. In interviews, government workers stated that English prevails in their offices. English is the language of Rarotongan courtrooms, but if the accused prefers CIM, the judge and other participants will switch to CIM for the duration of the case, giving the final judgement in both CIM and English. Parliamentary proceedings are bilingual: translators interpret all proceedings, translating to English if the speaker chooses to use CIM and to CIM if the speaker uses English. However, based on one day's proceedings in July 1995, most speeches (4:1) were given in English and translated into CIM. Loan word data within those speeches indicate that English is the dominant language despite enforced bilingualism. Table 1 shows all the loan words used in either language during the course of a half day in parliament.

CIM is often the preferred language in religious settings. Nearly all Cook Islanders attend church and language usage there tends to vary by denomination. The Catholic Church holds an early Sunday Mass in CIM; other services are in English. Seventh Day Adventist services are in English, Mormon services in CIM. The majority of Cook Islanders belong to the Cook Islands Christian Church (CICC), founded by the London Missionary Society in the nineteenth century. In CICC churches, language choices vary from one church to another. The Sunday service in Avarua Church in Rarotonga's largest town was in both English and CIM. In Arorangi, the CICC Church is a beautiful historic building located near several resorts. There, the service was also bilingual, but instead of translating from either language, for every two readings in CIM, a third was in English. In Nikao, a Rarotongan neighborhood settled by Outer Islanders, a CICC church service was conducted entirely in CIM.

Public events especially those having a cultural or patriotic theme are conducted in CIM or in both languages. An *Ariki* (hereditary chieftain) is initiated in a CIM ceremony. The Constitution Day celebrations that marked the thirtieth anniversary of independence in early August of 1995 were bilingual with some clear distinctions: political speeches were given in English; musical entertainments were sung in CIM.

English dominates Cook Islands media. The daily newspaper is in English with one story per day in CIM. English commentary is the standard for one radio station; on the other, one third of the commentary is in CIM. On both stations, every third song is in CIM, a testimonial to Cook Islander's prolific musical talent. Imported English language programs, especially from TV New Zealand, are the usual fare on television, though some indigenous programming exists as well.

CIM is the preference of speakers in some work settings (e.g., construction, agriculture), English in others (government, tourism). Proprietors of retail establishments codeswitch, using CIM with other Cook Islanders and English with most customers of European descent, especially tourists. Tourism is second only to government as an employer, and since most tourists are from New Zealand, Australia and the USA, Cook Islanders employed in these settings speak mostly English. Tourism received a boost with the opening of an International Airport on Rarotonga in the 1970's, but is still constrained by the remoteness of the islands and the reluctance of developers to build on land legally tenured to natives.

Most of the verbatim samples of codeswitching I collected were of English phrases interspersed in predominately Maori discourse. Here are some examples.

- (1) A native teacher lectured a secondary school Home Science class on diet and health in CIM. Her fluent native speech was peppered with English phrases: «too much smoking»; «cancer, heart attack, stroke»; «rest in peace»; «ice

cream, fish, tuna fish»; «dengue fever»; «that's lovely»; «okay, boys»; «all right»; «two, four, six, eight».<sup>1</sup>

- (2) Primary school children sang a CIM song with the English refrain «Do this, do that».
- (3) A secondary school singing and dancing performance<sup>2</sup> in CIM, included the English words, «Happy Birthday».
- (4) A middle-aged Maori speaking with friends in CIM at an outdoor restaurant noticed a passing vehicle, said «That's a nice car», and resumed conversing in CIM.
- (5) In a CICC church, the minister concluded a scripture reading in CIM with «Let us pray».

On the other hand, the English speech of Cook Islanders incorporates a number of CIM loan words, mostly for indigenous objects or concepts that have no counterpart in standard English. Some examples include local plants used for food e.g., *taro*, *kumara* (sweet potato), *maniota* (arrowroot), *nu* (coconut milk) and Maori customs e.g., *umukai* (a traditional feast), *pe'e* (a traditional style of chanting).

To summarize, English appears to be gaining ground in Rarotonga. It dominates the political arena, is required for most jobs and those that pay best, and (as a result) is more highly valued by parents for their children and by young people themselves. Although Cook Islands adults value CIM, they do not appear to believe that it is at risk, and this belief increases the danger of language loss. Codeswitching behaviors in general reveal that the intrusion of English into Maori speech is significant, and that CIM has a less notable effect on the English spoken by Cook Islanders. However, some demographic forces support the continued bilingualism of Rarotonga.

According to Kauraka (1994), language shift toward English in the Cook Islands is inversely proportional to the distance of the island from Rarotonga. CIM is the preferred language on all but one of the inhabited Outer Cook Islands. Schools on these islands have not been as successful teaching English, and natives do not need English for a largely subsistence lifestyle. Hunting, fishing and farming meet most of the needs of Outer Cook Islanders, especially on the larger, more fertile southern islands in the Cook Group. However, many Outer Islanders are attracted to Rarotonga's market economy and its superior schools for their children. In turn, many Rarotongans and Outer Islanders, frustrated by the limited number of jobs available in the capital, leave from the international airport on Rarotonga to migrate to New Zealand

1. CIM speakers in general used English numbers since the CIM numbering system calls for longer words and phrases.
2. Cook Islanders refer to a rehearsed group performance of music and/or dance as an «item», an example of an English word that has taken on new meaning to serve a Cook Islands context.

or Australia. Twice as many Cook Islanders now live abroad (about 40,000) as in the Cook Islands.

The movement of people in and out of Rarotonga appears to have established an environment for a stable bilingual society. Outer Islanders move to Rarotonga with a proficiency in CIM that renews the native language. Children and adults ambitious to improve their economic situation are highly motivated to learn English, and those who gain proficiency are also most likely to emigrate to higher education and higher paid jobs abroad. Despite the preference for English among the youth of Rarotonga and its dominance in places of power, the outflow of English speakers through emigration and resupply of CIM speakers from the Outer Islands have set up a dynamic equilibrium that supports bilingualism.

Although a language policy promoting bilingualism seems ideal for the postcolonial Cook Islanders, their bilingualism is largely the result of a pattern of individual choices beyond the control of policy makers. Those Cook Islanders who prefer a market economy and participation in a wider world, would be constrained by monolingualism in a language spoken by a small population, and so they choose to learn English. Those Cook Islanders who choose to remain, at least for a time, on the Outer Islands, serve all Cook Islanders as they maintain the indigenous language, the foundation to their unique cultural identity.

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